The Howl and the Pussy: Feral Cats and Wild Dogs in the Australian Imagination

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This paper looks at recent attention given to feral cats in Australia, particularly focusing on their symbolic status in eco-nationalist discourses. Australian eco-nationalism is a specific blend of environmentalist and patriotic sentiments which, in an exaggerated way, positions the feral cat as a rapacious European invader predating on native wild life. This vilification of the cat can be related to much earlier forms of (mainly European) symbolism associating the creature with femininity and evil, which I illustrate by looking at the manner in which the feral cat is opposed to the masculinised Australian wild dog—the dingo. I argue that the recent surfacing of this totemic opposition between 'the howl and the pussycat' is related to an eco-nationalist sense of place which simultaneously recognises and denies that the human colonisation of Australia was (and is) a form of feral invasion.

It seems that the merciless human rearrangement of the whole earth is to have no green ending. (Les Murray 1996, excerpt from the poem 'On the Present Slaughter of Feral Animals')

Groundwork: pets versus pests

In October 1996 the West Australian Liberal Member of Parliament Richard Evans called for the eradication of all feral, stray and domestic cats in Australia by 2020. To achieve this, Evans advocated the use of biological control agents similar to the controversial rabbit *calicivirus* and the selective breeding of certain indigenous species as substitute pets. The pet potential of some of the species proposed to supersede Australia's estimated three million domestic cats was whimsically examined in one of Melbourne's weekend newspapers. The author, Geoff Strong, slated a 'companion animal guide' in which the Eastern Quoll was described as 'mischievous and cheeky'; suggested names included 'Whiskers' and 'Quincy'. The Tasmanian Devil was dubbed 'tough, suitable for the pit bull terrier brigade'; possible names included 'Fang' and 'Lucifer'. The Tamar wallaby, deemed 'attractive', could be called 'Wally' or 'Skippy', while the Bandicoot,

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said to be 'tough' and 'inquisitive', might be named 'Browny' or 'Bandy' (*The Sunday Age*, 20 October 1996).

Evans' call for the extermination of all cats was momentarily successful in usurping the outpourings of Pauline Hanson[1] from the headlines. I suspect that the media were not blind to the metaphorical parallels between Evans' remarks and Hanson's anti-immigration and Anglo-Celtic nationalist diatribe. For both members of the federal Parliament enunciate curiously analogous sentiments. Hanson's rally to limit Asian immigration and her criticisms of multiculturalism resonate with Evans' call for the extermination of feral invaders. Both proposals advocate the notion of a 'closed' Australia, a land where 'others' are no longer welcome. In the fervent ecological desire to return the Australian landscape to a pre-colonial, Arcadian past, the issue of feral animal control echoes certain representations of culture, giving rise to an ambiguous conflation of social and biotic communities. The conflation comes about through the idea of belonging (what does and does not belong in Australia) and, as a form of totemic identification, it is a pleonastic feature of contemporary conservationist discourses.

Conservationist sentiments, like Evans', are expressions of a diverse and diffuse system of values and beliefs concerning the human relationship to nature. How then do we analyse this 'ism'? As Milton has observed, most sociologically oriented analyses have tended to focus on environmentalism as either a part of the broader study of social movements (as a political ideology) or as part of the political spectrum (1996:78-88). While I certainly acknowledge these dimensions, I believe environmentalism to be more than the sum of these parts. I suggest (following Milton) that environmentalism is also an intrinsically cultural phenomenon (1996:33).

On one level, environmentalism is a mythology of nature—an assemblage of stories about people and place.[2] It is a global phenomenon with distinctly local manifestations (as illustrated by my introductory anecdote), yet there are parallels between Australian discourses and those of other post-colonial societies. Colonial occupation, the dispossession of the Aboriginal inhabitants and the uniqueness of Australian plants and animals have been configured in distinctively post-colonial understandings of nature. As Griffiths remarks: 'for Australian settlers, "ecology" and "empire" represented the competing realities of geography and history, land and culture, and stood for a fundamental, persistent tension between origins and environment' (1997:11). This tension explains why so many studies of Australian attitudes to nature are historical—histories that detail settler Australians 'spoiling' (Bolton 1981), 'taming' (Lines 1992), 'wasting' (Marshall 1966) and 'future-eating' (Flannery 1995).

My approach is informed by a form of phenomenology, in that I want to look at environmentalism as a system of accepted and contested beliefs that invokes a certain way of understanding the world and peoples' place in it. As such, I make little distinction

1. See McKenzie's paper (this volume) for further description of Pauline Hanson and what she stands for.

2. However, I am uncomfortable about branding environmentalism as wholly false consciousness. The exploitation of the natural world clearly has dire consequences, such as ozone depletion and the loss of bio-diversity. Environmentalism is, for many people, a practical response to real fears for survival, as well as a call for a reappraisal of human understandings of nature. Pederson suggests that, while 'nature is suffering, the concept of nature is thriving' (1992:148).

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between people's everyday understandings and 'scientific' knowledge of nature. In their production, circulation and interpretation, I see these as similar narratives of people and place.

The advantage of this perspective on environmentalism is that it overcomes a problem that Milton outlines, namely, how to investigate the gulf between people being concerned about the environment and people acting upon this concern (1996:33-34). This gulf between belief and practice is well illustrated by statistics that indicate that seventy percent of Australians think environmental protection is as important as economic growth (ABS 1996:5-9), whereas only four and a half percent are members of environmental organisations (Crook and Pakulski 1995:50). Many Australians clearly hold somewhat latent views about nature. The diffusion and dynamic potential of environmentalist discourses thus make empirical study difficult. In essence, I am attempting to extract a subjectivity, the everyday thoughts and feelings of people, from the 'anonymity' of discourse (Jackson 1989:1).

My data are drawn from texts concerning feral and indigenous animals. They include educational resources produced by pastoral, agricultural and conservation agencies, as well popular natural history journals, radio and newspaper reports, weekly news magazines, television documentaries and websites. Feral creatures are, it seems, ever-present in these locations, which brings me to my final point of clarification. The analysis put forward here is prismatic, but not all of the facets of the prism fit side by side. Some are disjunctive, some are conjunctive, but all work together in myriad ways. In light of the diffusion of environmentalist discourse, I have opted to focus on only one theme—animality. The choice seems arbitrary, but I am fascinated by the analogous ways in which feral and indigenous animals figure in the discourses noted above. Indeed, my own enchantment with certain totemic narratives is the impetus behind this paper.

Anthropology, environmentalism and animals

Animals are a circular source of symbolic sustenance. Most anthropologists would agree that human attitudes to animals are projections of our attitudes to 'others' and ourselves. Such anthropocentricism stems from the peculiar subject-object status accorded to animals in general—they are simultaneously not and almost human (Willis 1974:128). Implicitly, though, humans too, are, and are not, animal—hence the intense anthropological investment in the late 19th and early 20th centuries in Australian totemism (Durkheim 1976; Frazer 1910; Freud 1964). Initially considered a principally exotic phenomenon, totemism came to be understood through the work of Lévi-Strauss (1964, 1966) as something not exclusively 'primitive'. Concomitant with the rekindling of anthropological interest in totemism, environmental discourses have (at least since the 1960s) substantially influenced the popular perception of humanity's relationship with its environment. In Australia, 'ethnoscientific' discourses have been particularly influential in this respect (Morton and Smith 1996) and the superimposition of these upon settler Australian perceptions of nature have moulded the discourse in a 'neototemistic' way (Willis 1990:6).

Perhaps the first question to be addressed here is: how and why is it that indigenous nature exerts such a huge influence on the settler-Australian imagination? How much are we made by the place we inhabit and how much does it make us? The fact that the majority of the Australian population resides in urban environments no doubt intensifies the capacity to mythologise Australian nature. It is more than coincidental that Australian

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environmentalism had its modern genesis in the 1960s,[3] a decade in which settler Australians came to recognise themselves as predominantly suburban and to finally acknowledge (by referendum) the citizenship and voting rights of Aboriginal people. Thomas (1983) uses similar structuralist logic to explain the changes in European attitudes to nature in the nineteenth century. For him, attitudes to the natural world altered between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries because of increased urbanisation. As town populations increased dramatically during the industrial revolution, people literally came to live further from nature. This geographical distance, Thomas suggests, was responsible for an inverse 'closeness' with certain animal species, which became pets. People living in cities could afford to sentimentalise their relationship with nature in general, and animals in particular. Tester (1991) argues that, although this may partly explain changes in human attitudes to the natural world, such attitudes are also illustrative of an anthropocentric symbolic facility. Thus the contemporaneous support in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries for the anti-slavery and animal rights movements is seen as a form of totemic correspondence. As Aboriginal people have long been considered part of nature, and because of the peculiarities of Australian demographics, both Tester's and Thomas's ideas seem applicable here. To illustrate the intersubjectivity of humans and animals in environmentalist narratives, we can begin to contextualise Richard Evans' anti-feline tirade.

'The only good cat is a flat one!'

If a thing's power can be gauged by the response it generates, then the humble 'moggie' is monstrously endowed. Its wild antics have not only mobilised a wide variety of government and non-government organisations,[4] but also fuelled the national imagination. Pussies on the loose have become a 'feral peril' (Winters 1989), listed as one of five key threatening processes by the Australian Nature Conservation Agency (ANCA). Controversial conservationist and managing director of Earth Sanctuaries Limited (ESL), John Wamsley, runs his own campaign to rid Australia of all feral species. He especially hates cats. By his own admission, he has been killing cats since he was ten years old.[5] Described as the 'loosest cannon in the conservation movement', he has for fourteen years conducted a campaign to rid Australia of feral animals (*The Sydney Morning Herald*, 13

3. Publications in the 1960s such as A. J. Marshall's *The Great Extermination: A Guide to Anglo-Australian Cupidity, Wickedness and Waste*, and Webb et al. *The Last of Lands: Conservation in Australia* signalled the local emergence of a global trend with political, social, religious and philosophical dimensions. This is not to say that conservation did not exist prior to this time. However, the 1960s heralded the modern era of environmentalism as a powerful alternative discourse.

4. Including the Australian Conservation Foundation: the Australian Nature Conservation Agency's (ANCA) Invasive Species Unit; the Australian and New Zealand Environment and Conservation Council; the Bureau of Rural Resources; the Bureau of Resource Sciences; the National Farmers Federation; the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals; the Standing Committee on Agriculture and Resource Management; the Vertebrate Pests Committee; the Threat Abatement Plan; the Wildlife information and Rescue Service; and the World Wide Fund For Nature.

5. He also recommends that Australians trap and eat feral cats. His favourite recipe is camp-oven cat cooked with vegetables for three hours.

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April 1996). Wamsley, who first entered the popular imagination when he wore his own creation, the flat-cat-hat, to the 1991 South Australian Tourism Awards, aims through ESL to control a significant number of Australia's endangered mammals.[6] His strategy plainly appeals to the nine hundred-odd 'good natured' investors (www.esl.com.au) in ESL who Wamsley describes as 'the mums and dads of Australia' (*The Sydney Morning Herald,* 13 April 1996).

It is not only maverick conservationists who indulge in 'moggie-bashing'. Australians who would not consider themselves environmentalists nonetheless express similar opinions of feral cats. In an impassioned plea during the recent Constitutional Convention, Janet Holmes á Court called on poets and writers to be enlisted in the drafting of a preamble to Australia's republican constitution. Feral cats got a mention amidst her nationalising, republican invocation: 'We need the smell of eucalyptus in this, and the feel of red dust. We need to have the feel of swimming in the sea and all those things that make us feel so passionate about this country and love it so much—eating beef and no feral cats' (*The Advertiser*, 14 February 1998). Nor is ridding the country of feral invaders the sole prerogative of individual crusaders. Australian governments wish to be seen to be doing something about the eradication of feral species and the re-establishment of indigenous ones. In the 1996 March federal election, a major feature of the National Liberal Coalition campaign was an environment package. Budgeted at $816 million, the proposed plan explicitly targeted feral flora and fauna.[7]

Eradicating certain feral species, then, is for many people a national priority. But, given the universal appeal of cats, why do conservationists so loathe this creature? In light of my introductory remarks concerning interpretations of history, geography and culture, I think we need now turn to the range and magnitude of the historical relationship between people and cats in other parts of the world. This should aid us in tracking the cat down under.

'O lovely pussy; O pussy, my love; what a beautiful pussy you are'

At the very least, the cat's prehistory of human cohabitation extends back to the Middle Kingdom of the Egyptian empire (that is about 3,600 years), although remains of a cat have also been found in a Neolithic site in Cyprus dated to about 7,000 years ago (Clutton-Brock 1988:26). One theory has it that cats decided to live with humans and not the other way around. Attracted by the hordes of rats and mice that frequented the Egyptian granaries, the African Wild Cat (*Felis lybica*) is the most likely ancestor to all domestic cats. Eventually lured into Egyptian households, the cat became a revered and protected creature, assuming the status of a minor deity. This cat deity, known as Bastet, featured in

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6. To achieve this goal Wamsley plans to become the country's biggest private landholder: by 2020 he hopes to own one percent of all Australian land. His strategy is straightforward. He purchases land, fences it, eliminates all feral species within it, and then reintroduces locally extinct or endangered animals. Funds are generated from the sale of shares (fourteen million to date) and by eco-tourism within each sanctuary.

7. The Coalition's proposed plan included: a 318 million dollars national vegetation initiative to plant indigenous trees and prevent the clearance of native vegetation; thirteen million dollars allocated to projects to revive native fish populations and reduce the numbers of European carp in the Murray-Darling region; sixteen million dollars to save endangered native species; nineteen million dollars to reduce the impact of invasive weeds; and sixteen million dollars for a national plan to eradicate feral animals (*The Age*, 1 February 1996).

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Egyptian mythology as both a mother and a virgin goddess. The death penalty was the prescribed punishment for the killing of a cat. Herodotus wrote that upon the death of a pet, household members would mourn as they would for a human companion, shaving their eyebrows and embalming their beloved cats (along with several mice) in preparation for burial. One such burial site, unearthed during construction operations earlier this century, contained hundreds of tonnes of mummified cats. Chris Dickman acerbicly details how the feline remains were subsequently used for fertiliser (1993:46).[8]

The cat's reputation as a mouser facilitated its export around the globe, but not without a few hiccups. For it seems the Egyptians were reluctant to part with their sacred pets. Unable to purchase cats by the usual trade routes, the Greeks stole several pairs and began breeding their own. They were supposedly the first Europeans to recognise the cat's value as a vermin catcher. From Greece, the offspring were sold to traditional trading partners, the Gauls, the Romans and the Celts, All went well for the cat until the Middle Ages in Europe, when the feline population suffered a severe setback. In an attempt to stifle the pagan symbolic potency of the cat, the Church denounced the creature as an agent of the devil. History was to expose the imprudence of this papal edict during a period when bubonic plague was rampant (and transferred by fleas from rats to humans).

Perhaps the origins of human animosity toward cats stems from this period, for the persecution of cats became widespread and often assumed grisly forms. One such example is the festival of Saint John, which was celebrated annually with the public burning of live cats in the town square (Schneck and Caravan 1990:9). Elias recounts the sixteenth century Parisian practice of cat burning as 'one of the festive pleasures of Midsummer Day' (Elias 1978:203). Accompanied by sombre music, spectators, including royal patrons, watched as cats were stuffed into a hessian sack and suspended over a bonfire to meet a hellish fate,

Robert Darnton furnishes an account of an event that took place in a Parisian printer's shop in the late 1730s. The narrative comes from the chronicles of an apprentice in the shop, Nicolas Contat (who has the pseudonym Jerome). Jerome and his fellow apprentice, Léveillé, were incensed by their mistreatment at the hands of their master and madam. The bourgeois owner's wife feted her pet cats at the master's table while the apprentices were fed leftovers from his plate. Angry at such feline usurpation the apprentices took action:

> Léveillé and his comrade Jerome preside over the fete, each of them armed with an iron bar from the shop. The first thing they go for is la grise, Madame's pussy. Léveillé stuns it with a quick blow on the kidneys, and Jerome finishes it off. Then Léveillé stuffs the body in the gutter, for they don't want to get caught: it is a matter of consequence, a murder, which must be kept hidden. The men produce panic on the rooftops. Seized by panic, the cats throw themselves into the sacks. Some are killed on the spot. Others are condemned to be hanged for the amusement of the entire printing shop. Printers know how to laugh; it is their sole occupation. (Darnton 1984:103)

Whereas Jerome regards this incident as 'the most hilarious experience' in his career, Darnton argues that most people today would find it at least unfunny, if not repugnant. 'Our own inability to get the joke is [thus] an indication of the distance that separates us

8. On this note, a relative of mine praises the virtues of composted cat, this being the reason for the extraordinary productivity of his tomato plants.

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from the workers of pre-industrial Europe' (Darnton 1984:78). It will become clear that I am not entirely convinced by this argument.

Deemed guilty by association with witches, the cat came to be regarded with great suspicion, its blackened reputation furnishing a string of bad omens. Edward Topsell embellished the notion of feline contagion in his Elizabethan bestiary, *Historie of foure-footed beastes*:[9]

> It must needes be an uncleane and impure beast that liveth onely upon vermin and by ravening, for it is commonly said of a man when he sneezeth, that he hath eaten with Cats: likewise the familiars of Witches do most ordinarily appeare in the shape of cats, which is an argument that this beast is dangerous in soule and in body. (St Glare Byrne 1979:106)

Furthermore, according to Tabor, the belief that cats have nine lives originates in the limit on the number of times a witch could assume the form of her familiar (Clutten-Brock 1988:55). The supernatural powers of felines were not limited by their corporeality. The discovery of mummified cats encased between the walls of eighteenth century houses attests to the belief that, even in death, they would deter rats (Clutten-Brock 1988:57).The cat was also feared and persecuted for its supposedly lascivious nature. Serpell maintains that the ownership of an animal pet or 'familiar' during the time of the English witch trials (1570-1700) was regarded as proof of necromancy, and in general, 'affectionate relationships between people and animals were regarded as immoral' (1988:40-41).

As a result of such persecution, the cat population rapidly waned until pet breeding became fashionable amongst the upper classes of Europe in the mid-eighteenth century. The National Cat Club, founded in Britain in 1871, was the first association set up to control the showing and breeding of cats. Ritvo (1988) argues that this particular European practice gained popularity largely because of the associated symbolism of human dominion over other humans and the natural world. Thus, in a land devoid of domesticates and populated with primitive and bizarre creatures, cats were one of the vestiges of civilisation (however ambiguous) accompanying the European colonists into Australia.

Cats in the colony: ecological imperialism and acclimatisation

The Hentys brought at least one tabby with them to Portland, Victoria in 1834. A journal entry from Dr Hobson, recording a journey with a cat between Melbourne and Sydney on May 9 1839, describes the feline hunter catching a (now extinct) Rabbit-eared Tree Rat (anon. 1993:1). Reports such as this might send shivers down a conservationist's spine, but we should bear in mind that abhorrence of invasive species (and the inverse passion for indigenous ones) is a relatively recent phenomenon in Australia. Quite the opposite sentiments prevailed in the past, as deliberate state-sanctioned efforts were made to Europeanise the antipodean continent.

Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries various acclimatisation societies actively promoted the introduction of hundreds of alien plant and animal species into the Australian landscape. The rationale for such action was the belief that European fauna and flora would aid the colonist in the task of civilising the unruly Australian bush. The Acclimatisation Society of Victoria, founded in 1861, had depots at Gembrook and at Phillip Island from which they dispersed exotic plants, fish, birds and animals. Many of

9. First published in 1607, but still available in the early eighteenth century.

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these species, such as quail, rabbits and deer, were for sporting purposes. Alfred Crosby has described this Europeanisation of colonial territories as 'ecological imperialism' (1986). Crosby maintains that colonial industry was ably assisted by a vast armada of pathogens, weeds, pests and domesticated animals in their conquest of indigenous peoples and indigenous biota. Europeans, he says, brought with them 'a grunting, lowing, neighing, crowing, chirping, snarling, buzzing, self-replicating and world-altering avalanche' (Crosby1986:194).

Many other domestic animals have subsequently been incorporated into the Australian biotic community by less formal means than those adopted by acclimatisation societies. Domestic escapees, including horses, camels, pigs, donkeys and goats, have all established themselves in feral colonies across Australia. Thus 'ecological imperialism', states Griffiths, was 'sometimes a purposeful partnership and sometimes accidental' (1997:2). Indeed, both chance and intent combined in many instances to establish and extend feral populations in recombined ecologies. Rabbits, the 'chainsaws of the outback', were ably assisted by the availability of food and water on the frontiers of the expanding pastoral and agricultural industries. In addition, fires and logging coincidentally made new grazing habitats for them. Furthermore, with the 'grey blanket' came the rabbit's feral predators, foxes and cats, quickly establishing an ecological interdependence that continues to plague eradication strategies.

Many of these 'other' colonists have proved to be economically and ecologically disastrous. In the late nineteenth century, thousands of domestic cats were released to combat the millions of rabbits threatening to destroy Australia's farming and grazing industry. In 1886, the New South Wales Government freighted four hundred cats by rail to the outback town of Bourke. Likewise, the owner of Wooloomanata Estate, north of Geelong in Victoria, was reportedly enthralled with the efforts of his three hundred-strong rabbit patrol squad. Indeed cats were considered the 'final solution' to the rabbit problem (Rolls 1969).[10] One incredible scheme involved W. E. Abbott, the first President of the Central Stock Board of Advice, counsel to the New South Wales Minister for Lands. In 1913 Abbott published a booklet entitled *The Rabbit Pest and the Balance of Nature,* in which he outlined his Malthusian strategy to mobilise cats against rabbits. Abbott reasoned that, if 100 cats were set among 10,000 rabbits on 100,000 acres, within three years the growing cat population (1,125) would consume the last of the remaining 328,500 rabbits, and the balance of nature would thus be restored (Rolls 1969:168-169).[11] The pervasive developmentalist colonial ethos was sufficient to guarantee that the subsequent environmental consequences of the residual feline population remained unspecified.

Clearly, settler Australian understandings of plants and animals have altered dramatically after interactions with the local environment. This is most apparent in the aesthetic sense. Journeying across the Blue Mountains in 1822, Barron Field, observed: 'New South Wales is a perpetual flower-garden, but there is not a single scene in it of

10. Although Victoria and New South Wales were in agreement with regard to the feline appetite for underground mutton, and actively legislated in the 1880s to protect cats, the Tasmanian Parliament showed great forethought in introducing a law in 1868 fining anyone found dumping cats in the bush.

11. Not that the practice of enlisting feral creatures as human allies has abated. Neither has the potential for these episodes to fuel narratives of epic proportions, as was illustrated by Mark Lewis's 'infotainment' documentary film *Cane Toads.*

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which a painter could make a landscape, without greatly disguising the true character of the trees' (Smith 1975:35). Field postulated that the reason for the ugliness of the Australian landscape was the absence of deciduous vegetation. Eucalypts and acacias were not picturesque; they were an affront to European sensibilities. Similarly, Australian animals were perceived to be aberrations of (colonial) nature. The Latin nomenclature of the platypus (*Ornithorhyncus paradoxus*) denotes the original belief that its assemblage of hybrid features were the handiwork of a highly skilled, but apparently lunatic, vivisectionist.

But the idea of conservation did exist among colonists, even though it was not conservation as we might think of it now. Conservationists today would most likely be uncomfortable with Griffiths' observation that colonial hunters instigated some of the first conservation legislation and established game reserves to protect wildlife (1996:33). These game reserves were the forerunners of national parks. However, because indigenous animals were deemed not sufficiently wild to be good sport, colonial protectionism extended only to introduced wildlife. Acclimatisation societies were consequently enthusiastic advocates of Victorian hunting culture. The establishment of game laws in Victoria in the 1860s, for example, corresponded with the official introduction of rabbits, and therefore, protected them as game, the sole property of the squatters on whose land they were found (Griffiths 1996:16).[12]

Precisely because both agriculturalists and pastoralists scorned them, rabbits very quickly came to be considered pests. Feral cats, on the other hand, have only recently acquired this status, not because they threaten primary industry, but because they threaten the livelihood of indigenous animals. The reversal of sentiment operates as a historical inversion. Introduced animals were once protected and valued, but indigenous animals were considered pests because they threatened European sensibilities. Now it is indigenous animals that are valued and protected for their intrinsic worth, while feral animals are loathed because they threaten native species.

Bearing this in mind, Evans' remarks are not just about cats. They typify contemporary eco-nationalist sentiments that acknowledge indigenous fauna and flora as having certain rights to live unmolested in their own particular domains. On the other hand, most feral species are perceived as 'matter out of place' (Douglas 1966). Contemporary indigenisation is explicit in the Aboriginal ownership and management of national parks, and implicit in enlightened settler Australian understandings of indigenous nature as authentic and primordial (Morton and Smith 1996).

But what is the basis for the reversal of human sentiment which leads to the valorisation of indigineity and an inverse loathing for things feral? And why do a few feral species, like brumbies,[13] seem exempt from such loathing? Given that there are nearly two million sheep and cattle in this country, all contributing to land degradation, why is the feral cat

12. The link between conservation and hunting continues. As Adrian Franklin has noted, contemporary white Australian hunters have sidestepped the bulk of environmentalist scorn (such as is evident in criticism of hunters in the UK and the USA) by targeting introduced species, such as pigs and deer, as their prey. Indeed, they only come into conflict with conservationists over the shooting of indigenous waterfowl (Franklin 1996:52-54). Hunters are also active in state-sponsored culling programs aimed at reducing the numbers of feral animals in National Parks and protected areas.

13. Brumby is the colloquial term for wild horse in Australia.

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judged so harshly by conservationists? There are indeed, many ways to skin a cat, but we need to return in detail to the feline saga in the antipodes to elucidate the intricacies of this feral/indigenous dialectic.

Felis catus: pet or pest?

ANCA's Endangered Species Unit (ESU) estimates that there could be twelve million cats in Australia. True to their resourceful and independent nature, feral felines are highly adaptable to a range of environmental conditions and can survive and reproduce (up to eight kittens a year) in all habitats. Once established in an area they maintain discrete home ranges, eating anything 'up to the size of a brush-tail possum' (Wilson et al. 1992:56). Adults are solitary, primarily nocturnal and shelter by day in rabbit burrows or hollow logs. Adult feral cats are not threatened by any major predators, but kittens may be eaten by dingoes, foxes and wedge-tailed eagles. Their average weight is six kilograms for a male and four and a half kilograms for a female; but one feral cat caught in New South Wales weighed over sixteen kilograms.[14] These fur-clad outlaws do not need water, since they get their fluids from fresh prey, of which they require 300 grams per day. Exactly what percentage of native animals figure in their diet is open to speculation, but one source estimates that feral cats kill 104 million indigenous animals per year (Greenwood 1993:14).

However, it is not only what the outlaw cat kills, but also how it goes about it that apparently offends many people. 'Killing is what cats do better than any other animal in Australia', claims the narrator of *Killers in the Bush* (a television program shown on Channel 9 in August 1994). A similar tone is adopted in the following impassioned extract from the natural history magazine *Wildlife Australia*:

> In January 1991 in the Tanami Desert, a 4kg possum-sized cat, with pug-marks the size of a lynx, stalked a small, shaggy, buff-coloured animal the size of a European hare. After the kill, the wild cat dragged the animal 120m before gnawing off the front legs, slicing through the neck and delving into the chest cavity. Gorged, the cat left the rest of the animal to rot. The victim was the twelfth in a grisly series of murders—a pouch young reared from 11 reintroduced Rufous Hare Wallabies or Mala (*Lagorchestes hirsutus*), a native Australian on the verge of extinction. (van Oosterzee 1992: 18)

Predation is not murder, but such anthropomorphic interpretations of feline intent are peppered throughout natural history journals and television documentaries alike. Neither is the feral cat the only species out there doing the killing. Would van Oosterzee have been less rancorous had the *mala* been killed by a wedge-tailed eagle or a dingo? Inconsistencies abound in anti-cat rhetoric. For example, how does one explain the survival of many small marsupials in Tasmania, an island abounding in feral cats, and devoid of foxes and dingoes? Studies of populations in New South Wales and Victoria have also revealed that, contrary to popular opinion, rabbits and other introduced species form a major part of the feral cat's diet (Seabrook 1991; Seebeck et al. 1991). It seems reasonable, then, to view cats as being in complex ecological relationships with other feral

14. The metaphorical connotations of felines are bluntly articulated by Morton, who asserts that big feral cats 'seem to invoke more fear and disgust than most other feral creatures . . . because big aggressive pussies have to live down a long-standing symbolic lineage' (1990:49).

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and indigenous predators and their prey, but a history of revulsion can hide this simple fact.

According to Flannery, the Australian tally of mammal extinction is the worst the world has experienced in five hundred years, accounting for just less than one third of all mammal extinctions in that period. Ten percent of Australian mammals have become extinct since 1788, but most of these occurred in the first four decades (Flannery 1995:237). I am not attempting here to exonerate the feral cat, since it is undoubtedly a 'purr-fect predator' (Jones 1992). Nevertheless, I am fascinated by the degree of culpability accorded to the feral cat and not directed at other invasive species. Dickman clearly illustrates such inconsistencies. Whilst he blames the feral cat exclusively for the loss of Australia's small marsupials, he also notes that 'further research is clearly needed to understand the precise impact of cats on wildlife throughout Australia' (1993:51).[15] I suggest that, since the cat is not the sole perpetrator of crimes against native fauna, there must be other forces that render the accusation palatable to the Australian imagination. It is at this point that I turn to mythologies.

While feral cats have developed a reputation as killers of indigenous fauna, stray cats create problems for themselves and for their metropolitan neighbours.[16] 'To add insult to the cat's already injured reputation, domestic cat owners are being confronted with statistics that reveal their beloved pets' appetite for things other than Whiskettes, According to an ESU brochure, Australia's 'pet' cats chalk up seventy-five million wildlife 'victims' annually. So sullied is the backyard cat's reputation, that, in the language of one journal of natural history, they have now become the 'Raiders of the Last Ark': 'Our belated recognition of the damage cats cause to native fauna derives partly from our unwillingness to blame a favoured companion animal' (Dickman 1993:45). But one might also argue that unwillingness has turned into a headlong rush.

As a consequence of the mistrust of domestic felines, in November 1994 the Victorian Parliament passed the Domestic (Feral and Nuisance) Animals Act, which obliges cat-owners to register their pets with local councils.[17] Doubts about the dietary habits of domestic felines were at the heart of a dispute lasting several years in the Shire of Sherbrooke. The Lyrebird Survey Group estimated that the local lyrebird population had been halved in the past twenty years, and that the cause of such decline was (amongst other things) the shire's 18,000 domestic cats. Such accusations of feline appetite for the

15. There are many voices in the debate over the relationship between feral cat predation and the loss of indigenous mammals. Bolton(1981), for example, singles out hard-hoofed livestock as the most destructive animals in the post-1788 Australian environment, while Low asserts that such 'catastrophic extinctions in inland Australia could have been triggered by a combination of things—changed tire regimes, drought, defoliation by introduced stock, and predation by foxes and cats' (1996:80).

16. For example the Cat Protection Society takes in over forty-five thousand stray cats and kittens every year.

17. The State of Victoria alone has an estimated 1.4 million feline inhabitants: 900,000 'pets', 300,000 'strays' and 200,000 'feral' cats (Greenwood 1993:14). Registration fees range from four dollars for neutered animals to forty to sixty dollars for cats that have yet to be de-sexed. Cats found unregistered can cost their owners fines of up to five hundred dollars. Selective breeding has resulted in an extraordinarily diverse morphology of dogs. Cats, in spite of their many different breeds, remain relatively undifferentiated.

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council logo aroused much dissension in the community. The managers of a local wildlife sanctuary received hate mail, were harassed by phone and had the occasional dead animal nailed to their fence. In March 1991, these activities culminated in four shotgun blasts being fired into the windows of their residence. Later the same year, a boisterous public gallery witnessed the Sherbrooke Council vote in favour of legislation, allegedly the world's first, to impose a dawn to dusk curfew on local cats. Advocates of cat liberation loudly jeered the decision from the gallery. A placard was waved bearing the question 'Would You Cage Your Family?'. One chronicler of the event responded: 'Yes, if they were savage, indiscriminate, cold-blooded, inhumane killers' (Hampson 1991:15).

By 1996 feral, stray and domestic cats were being regularly conflated in the popular media. Domestic cats, says Evans are 'only one good feed away from being feral' (Sheather and Quartermain 1996:39). In turn, two pro-cat advertisements screened on commercial television networks stood out against the bulk of anti-cat material. One advertisement espoused the virtues of cats as exemplary pets, focusing on their rule in the family and the manner in which children learn a sense of responsibility from pet-care; the other featured well-known actress Ruth Cracknell detailing the merits of cat companionship. It is easy to see these strategies as a response from pro-cat organisations to the spate of anti-feline sentiments espoused by the likes of van Oosterzee, Dickman, Wamsley and Evans.

An American survey conducted in 1981 suggestively revealed something of the contradictory nature of human attitudes to cats. A sample of nearly one thousand people (cat and dog owners, as well as non-owners) showed that, while only four percent of people disliked dogs, 28% disliked cats (Selby and Rhoades cited in Rowan 1988:6-7). According to a survey by the Petcare Information and Advisory Service, 60% of today's 6.2 million Australian households have a pet. Of these 68% care for one or more dogs and 45% care for one or more cats (Baldock et al. 1996). Can the preference for dogs be interpreted as evidence of systemic anti-feline sentiment?

I suspect that, inasmuch as the 'pussy' appears to consistently symbolise femininity, the preference for dogs over cats may well be connected to masculinist biases. To test that idea in the Australian situation, I propose to examine the status of an animal that is 'wild' rather than 'feral'—the dingo.

The howl and the pussycat

In its time in Australia, the dingo has been both the companion of Aborigines and the bane of pastoralists. Recently, however, it has turned into a 'native Australian'—'our' wild dog. While the feral cat is now branded distinctly 'un-Australian', the migrant dingo has somehow not only evaded conservationist scorn, but also enlisted their passionate support (cf Breckwoldt 1988; Corbett 1995b). In July 1993, *Canis lupus dingo* was officially adoplted by the Australian National Kennel Association as 'pure-breed' Australian.

Just three years earlier, in a controversial raid by wildlife officers on Bruce Jacobs' nature park, six dingoes were shot and 49 others confiscated, on the grounds that permits had been breached. The New South Wales Government later apologised for the heavy-handed tactics of its officers, all charges against Jacobs were dropped, and most of the animals were returned. One of the returned dingoes, Tambo (named after a Queensland Aborigine), was appropriately awarded the first pedigree certificate by the Victorian

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Canine Association (VCA). In a report in *The Koori Mail*, Peter Watson, the president of the VCA, acknowledged that Tambo had 'met strict criteria for the newly-recognised breed, laid down by the Australian National Kennel Council'. The report went to even greater lengths to emphasise that the event was comparable to the recognition of Aboriginal people as Australia's original inhabitants by the High Court's Mabo decision: 'The dingo has been treated in much the same way [as Aboriginal people] by white men—dingoes were here before Cook too. They've both been persecuted and mistreated'. Jacobs also named one of his other registered dingoes Mabo, 'as a visual pun on the fact that the dog is coloured white' (*The Koori Mail*, 29 June 1994).

This new found status of citizenship brings the dingo 'in from the wild' (*The Sunday Territorian*, 25 July 1993) and challenges the pastoralist's perception of the animal as a pest, classified as vermin in all states. The 10,000 kilometre 'dog fence' stretching from Queensland to the South Australian coast is a testament to the awe the howl inspires in some people. Most pastoralists, it seems, have believed that the dingo dines exclusively on veal steaks and lamb chops. However, as more dingoes are studied, rather than poisoned, trapped and shot, there is increasing evidence suggesting domestic dogs turned feral are responsible for many major stock losses in south-eastern Australia. Indeed, conservationists now fear hybridisation may lead to the extinction of the dingo. This evidence has aligned conservationists, pastoralists and kennel clubs, all of whom wish to rid the country of unwanted hybrids. Likewise, research has also shown that only a small percentage of the dingo's diet consists of domestic animals like sheep and cattle (Green and Catling 1977). Dingoes have shown preference for indigenous tucker such as wallaby and kangaroo, where and when it is available (Newsome et al. 1983; Robertson and Harden 1985). The dingo thus exhibits a loyal appetite, it eats 'Australian'. Yet the feral cat's appetite for things other than mutton or beef has made it an object of popular contempt.

Most dingo-philes agree the animal arrived in Australia via south-east Asia some 4,000 years ago (Breckwoldt 1988; Corbett 1995a; Hudson 1974). When released into this continent, the dingo thrived and soon adapted itself to a range of habitats. Rolls believes dingoes 'had a startling effect on Australian animals, especially the kangaroo family which had previously been preyed on only by Aborigines, by wedge-tailed eagles and the slow, long-winded thylacines' (1992:17). The extinction of the thylacine on mainland Australia is contemporaneous with the arrival of the dingo. However, while the dingo is commended as an 'expert hunter with an omnivorous appetite' (Rolls 1992:17), the feral cat has been branded 'a destructive killing machine' (*Killers in the Bush*).

'Wild' dingoes have become our 'mates' in the bush, and according to pioneer mythology the bush is 'no place for a woman'—for the wilderness is itself an aspect of feminine nature, classically to be tamed. The dingo is accordingly masculinised in order to bring it in from the wild and into the cultural domain. Conversely, the feral cat is being shifted away from culture and towards the wild (or feral). Insofar as the dingo, along with other indigenous plants and animals, is becoming 'domesticated' in the popular imagination, the 'domestically challenged' feral cat continues to represent the darker side of all cats, tarnishing its reputation as a treasured companion. *Felis catus* has become a feline serial killer. The dingo, on the other hand, is now a 'native Australian' (Corbett 1995b:52): 'After 4,000 years the dingo belongs in Australia . . . It requires protection because it has fitted the scheme of natural order as a major predator' (Rolls 1992: 18). We should of course remember that Lindy Chamberlain was convicted of infanticide *not* by

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evidence that proved her guilt and unwomanly behaviour; instead, the prosecution chose to establish that the dingo was innocent of such monstrous practice (Marcus 1989). Now, cleared of all charges of murder (of both children and sheep), the dingo is bestowed citizenship papers and declared a national breed—'our' wild dog.

Gender plays a critical role in positioning both animals. After all a dog is, by definition, male ('a man's best friend'); a female dog is a contradiction in terms, for a canine that is not a dog is a 'bitch'. And, it follows, 'cat', is also gender specific. In prison vernacular a 'cat' is a male homosexual. A feline that is not a cat is a 'tom', and any female that is too boyish is a 'tomboy'—not forgetting that 'she is the cat's mother'. Such idiomatic examples, together with the aforementioned American survey, reinforce the notion, evident in the historical human relationship with cats, that Australian attitudes to felines reflect an element of misogyny.

Insofar as feline is feminine, it is a certain kind of feminine. Unlike dogs, cats are considered only marginally social. They conduct secretive nocturnal forays and cannot be trained (other than in the use of kitty-litter). Even when well fed, domestic cats cannot resist stalking and hunting. Generally acknowledged to be independent creatures (as opposed to the camaraderie and domestic loyalty of the dog). and unyielding to the breeder's whim,[18] cats like witches) symbolise feminine power and autonomy. *The Times* [London] recently published a photograph of 'feminist emperor' Germaine Greer which shows her seated in an office chair, naked, except for a ginger cat she cradles in her lap (re-published in *The Age*, 30 May 1998). The cat and 'the witch-wild woman' (Estes 1992:93) embody 'the feminine principle in its daemonic form . . . the shadowy power of the female . . . fecund and cruel, creating, cherishing and destroying' (Harding 1971:34). In short, feral cats embody the shadow of the conservationist's psyche, an alien, displaced, unrecognisable self. Dingoes belong, feral cats do not.

Conclusion

In the present climate of ecological anxiety in Australia the cat has surfaced as an appropriate scapegoat. Feral cats do kill indigenous animals, but they are just one of a number of perpetrators in the complex historical decline of bio-diversity in Australia. I have also argued that such vilification is not solely ecological in origin. Indeed, there is a range of sources for anti-feline sentiment, much of which is purely symbolic.

Of course the problem with any attempt to extract meaning from human attitudes to animals is how to determine the part played by the actual animal. But whatever a 'real' dingo or cat is, this may have little to do with the self-evident logos of folk taxonomy. Folk taxonomy may or may not correspond with the conservationist's order of things, but I maintain that the conservationist's vilification of the cat is underpinned by a more generalised assemblage of symbolic associations derived from folk taxa concerning the wild and the feminine. Similarly the 'real' dingo is subsumed into a common sense understanding of the animal as (masculine) 'dog'. Hence, in nationalistic terms, dingo is 'self; cat is 'other'. It therefore appears that, within the localised Australian symbolic economy, consumers seem reticent to disengage their conservative investment in domestic animals of long-standing symbolic currency.

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18. Selective breeding has resulted in an extraordinarily diverse morphology of dogs. Cats, in spite of their many different breeds, remain relatively undifferentiated.

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However, such conservatism is offset by the historical taxonomic inversion of dingo and cat. Previously deemed an ally in the Europeanisation of the continent, cats have come to be regarded as environmental pests, while the dingo, formerly the pastoralist's adversary, is currently being legitimised as a national pet. Such historical inversion need not appear contradictory according to contemporary cultural understandings. In fact, I suspect the inversion of this pair of four-footed signifiers is the key to comprehending why they have come to be instilled with such contemporary symbolic values.

On one level, the feral cat and the dingo signify transformations in the antipodean comprehension of Australian nature. Further, the howl and the pussycat interrogate the narrative of colonisation, a narrative that posits divergent strands of intersubjectivity. Current measures to eradicate feral species are also attempts to homogenise Australian nature. The cohesiveness of this 'natural' homogeneity is set against the cultural heterogeneity of Australian society. If the distinctiveness of the settler Australian identity stems from the uniqueness of Australian biota, then feral cats threaten not just indigenous nature, but the settler identity. Indeed, it has been suggested that the Australian landscape and the national psyche are 'awash in a sea of otherness' (Tacey 1995:114). Cats are loaded with conjunctive and disjunctive elements of both denial and recognition of the (human) colonist's status as feral, but this displacement manifests as an anxious sense of belonging. Feral cats embody an identity allegedly founded upon alienation, geographical dislocation and the masculinised conquest (Lines 1992) of Australian nature. Dingo narratives, on the other hand, affirm the notion that colonists can be indigenised. Yet, they also harbour the colonial persecution of the dingo as a pest. Rather than being abandoned, the colonial ethos is challenged by post-colonial eco-nationalist narratives. While the dingo may have once mauled the 'Golden Fleece', being a relatively recently naturalised Australian gives the dingo its distinctive symbolic potency—it remains open to identification by all colonisers.

In this exploration of the feral/indigenous dialectic I trust I have conveyed something of the inseparability and creative vitality of the totemic relationship in which human and non-human species are enmeshed in the post-colonial context. I believe the tale of the howl and the pussycat articulates something of the pragmatism and cultural adaptability evident in the assiduous process of antipodean reconciliation with Australian biota. Environmentalist narratives sustain a strategy of self-making (and un-making)—a strategy that selectively weaves the contradictions and congruities of past and present mythologies into contemporary doxa. But the reconciliation of history and environment endures as a contested discursive field, because its tension is neither wholly naturalised nor wholly accommodated. Australian natural history is, then, a national history, saturated in existential and normative aspects of human experience.

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